

Madison Avenue



Tobacco Troubles

EVEN Madison Avenue's hard-bitten professionals were jolted earlier this summer when the cigarette industry suddenly announced a series of voluntary restrictions on its advertising. Henceforth, the industry said, there would be no more display advertising in college newspapers, or on radio and TV shows aimed mainly at teen-agers. Youthful-looking models and athletic heroes would disappear from cigarette ads and industry spokesmen proclaimed a new era of "good judgment and good taste."

The impact of this sudden display of virtue was felt in many sectors. College newspapers reeled at the prospect of losing half their advertising revenue. Advertising agency executives, whose cigarette campaigns increasingly have focused on the youth market, convened emergency evening meetings to improvise new strategy. The hint by some companies that they intended to renounce the whole "virility approach" to cigarette advertising sent many agency men scurrying for the tranquilizer bottle.

Meanwhile, many consumers asked an obvious question: Why did they do it? Why did the cigarette companies, who have traditionally displayed little sensitivity to the taunts of their critics, suddenly invoke these voluntary curbs?

The main answer, it would seem, was simply that the industry was (and is) gravely worried. "Criticism, even from stockholders and directors, has been mounting steadily," one cigarette company president confided. "And much of the criticism concentrated on the charge that our ads made too blatant a pitch to the youngsters."

In view of this rising tide of criticism, industry leaders were concerned lest they be confronted with a restrictive code similar to those imposed in Britain and Canada. In Britain not only is cigarette advertising barred on TV prior to 9 P.M., but the government is pondering the idea of starting an advertising campaign on TV aimed at discouraging smoking.

Given this crisis, the Tobacco Institute, a trade group, called a series of meetings in Washington to discuss possible action. Some tobacco executives proposed voluntary curbs, while others opposed them on the grounds that they

would be interpreted as an admission that cigarettes were indeed a health hazard.

After heated debate, the former group prevailed and the curbs were announced. In issuing its announcements, the Institute, mindful of anti-trust laws, emphasized that it could only "suggest" action but could issue no industry-wide restrictions.

The voluntary curbs were neatly tailored to gain maximum public relations impact at minimum sacrifice. In giving up college media, for example, the companies were sustaining no great loss since they can easily reach college-age youngsters through other media—television, general magazines, etc. Moreover, there has been a growing trend among colleges to take the initiative in banning cigarette ads from student media.

Similarly, in restricting their youth approach, the cigarette companies left themselves plenty of latitude. Instead of a specific ban on sponsorship of programs before 9 P.M., the curbs simply state that companies should not sponsor shows directed mainly at youngsters. The definition of what constitutes a children's program, of course, will be left to the companies. Baseball and football games, which are followed with rapt attention by teen-agers, will definitely not fall under the industry's definition of a children's program.

Though it is easy to view the industry's action with cynicism, the fact remains that some industry leaders, such as Morgan J. Cramer of P. Lorillard and Bowman Gray of R. J. Reynolds, appear to be sincere in their desire to tone down their ads. Indeed, the industry can rightly point out that cigarette advertising has improved markedly in recent years.

It was not too long ago, after all, that cigarette companies actually advertised their products as a health aid. Ads carried such headlines as "Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet" or "Not a cough in a carload of Old Golds" or, the inevitable, "More doctors smoke Camels than any other cigarette."

In recent years the industry has backed off from these strident slogans, and indeed cigarette commercials have

become the ultimate in subtle advertising. The emphasis on virile-looking men or on healthy outdoor settings has been intended subtly to associate cigarettes with vigor and social acceptance. No one can blame a company for seeking to place its product in this sort of desirable context.

No one, that is, unless that product is proven beyond reasonable doubt to be a health hazard. And it is in this area that the cigarette industry confronts its biggest challenge. In the fall, a special advisory committee set up by the Surgeon General is expected to release a study of the medical evidence linking smoking with lung cancer and heart disease.

Meanwhile, several other studies are taking some sharp pokes at the industry. Legislation has been introduced in Congress to label tobacco as a "drug" and authorize the Food and Drug Administration to prohibit interstate shipments unless they are labeled to disclose hazards. And several books are in preparation, one sponsored by Senator Maurine Neuberger that will list the hazards of smoking.

One newly issued book, the *Consumers Union Report on Smoking and the Public Interest* (the Consumers Union, \$3.50), summarizes medical evidence which, its authors say, is "surely sufficient to persuade rational men and women that they should be better off not smoking."

It is impossible to predict what influence, if any, all this may have on the nation's 63,000,000 cigarette smokers who are willing each year to spend nearly \$7 billion for the privilege. Though cigarette consumption declined in 1953 and 1954 following reports of a link between cigarettes and lung cancer, the industry rebounded sharply in following years.

Some experts now claim to see signs of another slowdown. In 1962 per capita cigarette consumption fell slightly for the first time since the 1953-54 scare. The Surgeon General's report might spur even further declines.

In view of these problems, one might normally expect the industry's advertising to grow more shrill. But the crisis-hardened tobacco industry is exhibiting notable restraint in curtailing its advertising aimed at young people—a restraint which in the end might ward off cries for rigid government controls.

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